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“What all spirits we cd move”¹: Black Feminist Choreopoetics of Haunting and Healing in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*

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¹ This section of the title, as well as some of my early thinking and language about this text in relation to Crawford and Mahurin’s work, comes from my previous coursework.
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Introduction

In 2022, Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*² returned, under director Camille A. Brown, to the Booth Theater— the same stage that housed the performance when it first came to Broadway in 1976. This most recent performed iteration of the choreopoem is preceded by an audio clip of Shange talking to her daughter, Savannah, about their shared identity as “colored girls,” framing the work from the beginning around a passing of knowledge from mother to daughter (and outward, in this case, to the audience and listener). Following Shange's death in 2018, the decision to bring the choreopoem back to the same Broadway stage that housed it in the 1970s with Shange's omnipresent voice reaching the audience before any other sight or sound positions Shange as an absent— yet, in that space, intensely present— figure that “haunts” the production.

The choice to begin the modern performance with Shange's ghostly voice is not without basis from the written text of the choreopoem or from Shange's stated intentions in writing it. Prior to the text of *For Colored Girls*, Shange dedicates the book version of her choreopoem to “*the spirits of my grandma / viola benzena murray owens / and my great-aunt / effie owens josey / and always / my dearest mami & papi.*” In doing so, before the text begins, Shange establishes an ancestral spiritual presence and a nearness of death that will persist throughout the work. The text, through its dedication, honors the now-past members of Shange's family and seeks to keep their spirits ‘alive’ in remembrance— but it also serves to position the text in a constant proximity to death that permeates the bodies, minds, and spirits of the “colored girls” as they seek aliveness within its wake. To begin to understand the healing work that the choreopoem does, then, both in

² Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1975.

its written form and in its capacity as a performance blueprint, Shange asks us to start with the spirits— that is, to start from a position of haunting.

To attend a modern production of *For Colored Girls* is to sit with Shange’s legacy and to be engaged with the work of tracing that legacy alongside the shifting affective elements of the present moment— just as to attend to the text of the choreopoem is to sit with the legacy of Shange’s ancestors as named in its dedication. Camille Brown, the director of the 2022 Broadway production, is deeply engaged with the choreopoem as a legacy work; in an interview with Theater Mania, Brown reflects on her role as the first Black woman in six decades to direct a Broadway show, as well as the first Black woman ever to direct *For Colored Girls* on Broadway.³ She says, “And even though there was a reckoning happening in the 70s, there’s a reckoning happening now too. So, what does that look like in our show? How do we create a space where these words can be seen as timeless?”⁴

A sense of timelessness was certainly evident in the Booth Theater, where I had the opportunity to attend Brown’s take on the show in the summer of 2022. The care with which Brown treated Shange’s legacy was clear, from the initial audio of Shange’s voice filling the theater, to the openness of the stage with only light and color emanating from screens on either side, to the words of Shange’s poems largely unaltered in the script. Yet the energy of the theater felt fresh and strikingly necessary for the moment— the audience, as far as I could tell, was almost entirely made up of women, largely women of color. The atmosphere of joy and comfort in togetherness filled the theater before the production started and stayed palpable as the women took the stage, audience members cheering the women on as they danced the first scene. Brown’s

³ This show, in its early iterations, was performed by Shange herself and four other dancers/actors at the Bacchanal women’s bar, before moving to Broadway with a larger cast of seven and an Australian tour under director Oz Scott. Wild, Stephi. “The History of FOR COLORED GIRLS... and its Journey on Stage and Screen.” *broadwayworld*, 2022.

⁴ Gordon, David. “Interview: Kimber Elayne Sprawl Talks to Camille A. Brown About Building *For Colored Girls* in 2022.” *TheaterMania*. 2022.

version of the choreopoem certainly carries over the same affective elements present in Shange's original poems, but her question remains relevant: how exactly does she curate a space of legacy, inherited from an already haunted text, while also attending so effectively to the particular needs for care of the modern world and its audience?

There is no shortage of scholarship surrounding *For Colored Girls* as a literary text— from analyses of its vernacular language and form⁵ to close readings of the particular subject matter of the poems^{6 7}, to name just a few examples— and to a lesser extent as a performed play, largely through theater reviews. The existing scholarship, taken altogether, provides a rich and thoughtful understanding of Shange's work as it functions to uplift and make visible Black and Brown experiences of femininity and Queerness; but the uniqueness of the choreopoem format demands a mode of analysis that is not limited to either the text or performance in isolation. Shange's work requires careful methodologies that consider the relationship between text and performance as interconnected and inseparable in the way that we understand the work that the choreopoem does. In recent years, scholars of Shange's work— among them Mecca Sullivan in her book *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora*⁸— have made a move toward analyzing the choreopoem form and the uniquely “nuantial” (Sullivan, 73) poetics it enables. This move, as Sullivan articulates, allows us to understand the unconditional link between voice and body in choreopoetic expressions of Black Queer womanhood. But it also posits, through a deep engagement with the adaptive and embodied performance space,

⁵ Tellini, Silvia Mara. “Experimental Language Deconstructing Patriarchal Discourse in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*. Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 2015.

⁶ Louis, Diana Martha. “Bitch You Must Be Crazy: Representations of Mental Illness in Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Consider Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976).” *Western Journal of Black Studies*. Washington State University Press, 2013.

⁷ Waller-Peterson, Belinda. “‘Nobody Came/Cuz Nobody Knew’: Shame and Isolation in Ntozake Shange's ‘Abortion Cycle #1.’” *College Language Association*, 2019.

⁸ Sullivan, Mecca Jamilah. “‘walkin on the edges of the galaxy’: Queer Choreopoetic Thought in the African Diaspora.” *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora*. University of Illinois Press, 2021.

healing and ongoing care where it is often overshadowed by suffering or reduced to vaguely articulated or gender essentialist “female empowerment” in scholarship of the written text. In this paper, then, I posit the choreopoem as a crucial vehicle for understanding haunting and healing as they interact with the feminized, racialized body, and haunting and healing as crucial vehicles for understanding the choreopoem as a carrier, producer, and nurturer of this body. The language of surrogation, both as it has been applied to performance and as a reproductive practice, will guide my understanding of how choreopoetic performance “carries” haunting and healing together through a body of work. I understand my work as that of curating; through highlighting key affective moments in the choreopoem in conjunction with existing scholarship on the text and theoretical frameworks of haunting and Black feminist performance, I will seek to arrive at a new understanding of the healing potential present in Shange’s work.

I offer up the language of haunting and healing throughout this paper to lay out the work that the choreopoem does— but despite the seemingly linear movement that this paper takes from haunting into healing as dictated by the conventions of the essay format, I want to be clear that haunting and healing as I understand them are not linear movers. I begin with haunting as a mode of analysis for the choreopoem broadly, before moving into the work of the performance to carry and produce both haunting and healing together, ultimately guided by an analysis of ritual spiritual healing practices that draw upon the movements of the feminized body in community and communion with the ghosts that haunt it. Haunting is not an affliction that gives way to healing under the correct conditions— rather, haunting *is* the condition by which healing comes into process. It is my intention to offer the frameworks of surrogation and behaved restoration as the particular movers of both haunting and healing as carried by the equally fluid, living, and (re)productive practice of performance.

Each of the sections that follow will begin with a description of a key moment from the choreopoem, followed by a theoretical framework that will lend itself to an analysis of the haunting and/or healing work of the scene. The first section analyzes the opening scene of *For Colored Girls* as an introduction to haunting as Avery Gordon theorizes it, followed by an analysis of “a Nite With Beau Willie Brown” as an example of how haunting functions in the choreopoem. I will also discuss the poem “abortion cycle #1” in this section in order to draw out what I see as the particularly feminized pathways of haunting in the choreopoem. The second section will begin with the poem “Toussaint” as a basis for understanding how these feminized pathways of haunting become generative and productive, particularly in conjunction with the performance studies terminology of surrogation and behaved restoration. In the third section I will work with the final poem in the text, “A Layin on of Hands,” in order to illustrate the healing work embedded in the intersection of haunting and the feminized body, mind, and spirit. Ultimately, through a close analysis of selected scenes from the choreopoem, I will argue that productive understandings of choreopoetic performance facilitate movement among and with the ghosts in ways that attend to changing needs for care and ongoing restoration for Shange’s “Colored Girls.”

Haunting

In fitting with the text’s dedication to the spirits, as well as Shange’s own spirit presence in the theater, death and the dead are always present or proximal in *For Colored Girls*. In the first poem of the collection, the lady in brown pleads, “somebody/ anybody / sing a black girl’s song... / sing her song of life / she’s been dead so long / closed in silence so long” (18). Here, the

collection begins with the assumption that the “black girl”-- embodied in the six women who stand on stage frozen “in postures of distress” (17) as the lady in brown speaks-- is already dead. Much like the family of spirits in the text’s dedication, these lines position the “black girl” in a world that presupposes her death and traps her in silence. The synonymization of death with silence in this section suggests that to be unheard is to be unliving, and further that sound-- and particularly song-- is a carrier of life. It is only the lady in brown who, in her capacity to speak these lines and move her body freely through space, begins the choreopoem from a position of life as we can understand it in this poem. This language allows us to understand the ways in which physical presence does not necessitate life, and conversely, that physical absence does not necessitate death; the girl has been “dead so long,” yes, but the plea to sing her song of life suggests that both death and silence are conditional, potentially impermanent states. This language brings new significance, too, to Shange’s voice in the opening moments of the 2022 performance, four years after her death-- an effort to sing her own song of life when she herself has been “closed in silence so long.”

In Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters*,⁹ haunting is described as an absence that is demanding to be felt, something invisible yet crucial to recognize and reckon with. Because it is difficult to put haunting into concrete terms by nature of its intrinsic intangibility, it becomes necessary to understand haunting through the ghosts-- the more tangible or at least nameable manifestations-- that are haunting’s signifiers. In this sense, Gordon marks haunting as “a particular way of knowing” (Gordon, 8), an urge toward visibility that in turn becomes an urge toward understanding. The signification of something unnameable, the movement toward knowing, for Gordon, happens partly in the space of fiction. She writes, “Questions of narrative structuring, constructedness, analytic standpoint, and historical provisionality of claims to

⁹ Gordon, Avery. “her shape and his hand.” *Ghostly Matters*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

knowledge direct sociology to the ways in which our stories can be understood as fictions of the real” (Gordon, 11). From a sociological standpoint, narrative equips us with a system for understanding the most salient ghosts that are haunting our institutions, communities, and individuals at a given moment; from a cultural standpoint, it equips us with a system for *communicating* these ghosts with the goal of visualizing the invisible realities of our world and envisioning paths forward within and beyond those realities. Gordon terms this process “writing with the ghosts” (Gordon, 7)-- a process through which we get what can be termed the haunted text. When Gordon writes of the ways that we “sense” the ghostly, she establishes haunting as fluid in the ways that we receive it and perceive its structure; in the case of *For Colored Girls*, then, the girl that the lady in brown describes in the opening lines becomes the structure through which a larger sense of haunting— communal, generational, physical and extra-physical— is transmitted to the reader. In other words, the girl stands in for a broader sense of haunting that extends beyond herself, and thus is able to mold itself to encompass any of the structures of feeling¹⁰ that are salient in the moment of engagement with the text.

In thinking about this Black girl frozen in time as our primary sense of haunting in the choreopoem, I want to explore some of the dynamics of power inherent in the haunted text as Gordon describes it. Firstly, if we are thinking of narrative as a mode through which ghosts can be sensed and communicated, it is necessary to mark the position of the writer and audience in relation to the ghosts. By the very nature of the haunted text, there must always be a barrier

¹⁰ Raymond Williams coined the term “structures of feeling” in his essay by the same title, in which he describes feeling as a collective experience, as structural affect that we can culturally ‘sense’ and that shifts constantly and almost imperceptibly. Williams marks art as a mode of articulating or sensing the most structures of feeling that are most salient in a particular moment, and here I use Williams’ language to posit *for colored girls* (and performance more broadly, as I will continue to develop) as a marker of the shifts in structures of feeling over time. The girl who has “been dead so long” represents each of the seven women on stage, but she also carries new meaning for each audience as feeling evolves and salient cultural values and issues shift, ebb, and flow. Williams, Raymond. “Structures of Feeling.” *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 129–135.

between the true shape of the ghost and the shape that reaches us as readers, viewers, and consumers. To illustrate this, we can look toward the quote and surrounding context from which the first chapter of *Ghostly Matters* gets its title: “I look for her shape and his hand” (Gordon, 6). Here, Gordon quotes from *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, in which Patricia Williams describes her process of trying to find traces of her great-great-grandmother, an enslaved woman, through the writings of the man who enslaved her. The process of looking for her shape in his hand is always a process of looking through at least one degree of separation, often made even starker by the hand’s tendency to alter the shape with its own more solid one. This dynamic creates a direct sense of correspondence between the phantomized form and the tangibly embodied form that writes its absence, from which we are tasked with locating the haunting presence; however, it also exposes a hegemonic power structure through which it is the hand of the enslaver that writes the shape of the enslaved, as well as a fascinatingly gendered dichotomy wherein the phantomized form is feminized and the embodied form that reconstructs it is masculinized. These dynamics of gender, power, and agency that Gordon acknowledges in her work with haunting are important to keep in mind beginning with this initial scene of *For Colored Girls*, as each iteration of haunting that we sense through the Black girl frozen in “postures of distress” is an effort toward redress within these dynamics of gendered and racialized power.

I want to look now at the text of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* as an example of what Gordon understands as the haunted text, as well as a vehicle through which we can further explore what it means to “write with the ghosts” in a way that is rooted in the dynamics of gender and agency that Gordon frames for us. It is not always straightforward to identify what is enacting the haunting when the ghosts it manifests take multiple shapes. Here I want to look to the final narrative poem of the collection, “A Nite With

Beau Willie Brown,” as an instance of what Gordon describes through the transmission of haunted knowledge from the shape to the hand (and outward), and the ways in which the shape shifts as we become more attuned to it. In this poem Crystal, portrayed by the lady in red, tells the story of her children’s father, Beau Willie Brown, who suffers from PTSD and threatens Crystal, ultimately dropping their children from the window when she refuses to (or is not able to) publicly agree to marry him (78-84). Here, the lack of mental, emotional, and financial help for the father by the state projects onto his abuse of the mother and, finally, the death of the children in a cycle of violence from the state to the disenfranchised to their families. In reading this poem, there is a distinct sense of haunting— that is, of something unsettled, urging to be made visible; we feel it in the shock of the violent and untimely death of the children, in the persistent mental and physical unsafety of Crystal and Beau, and finally in the narrative shift from disconnected to horribly visible pain when the lady in red identifies herself as Crystal in the final lines of her narration. Yet the shape of this haunting is not immediately clear in the ghosts it creates. The poem seems to center itself around Beau Willie Brown, through its title as well as through its initial focus on building his character, his past, and his perspective: “there waz no air/ the sheets made ripples under his / body like crumpled paper napkins in a summer park/ ... there waznt nothin wrong / with him/ p.t.s.d./ p.t.s.c./ p.t.s./ he kept telling crystal” (78-79). It would seem, then, that the ghost that this poem shows us is making itself visible through Beau; however, when the narrative perspective of the poem shifts into first person with the final lines “i stood by beau in the window/ with naomi reaching / for me/ & kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fifth / story/ but I cd only whisper/ & he dropped em” (84), the poem’s ghost shifts into Crystal, the lady in red. The shapes that haunting takes in this poem are plural: we sense the haunting of domestic violence, of PTSD, and of drug addiction, but we sense this

haunting through father, mother, and children in different moments, following pathways based in shared and inherited trauma even when the ghosts we can identify are not singular or linear.

This tension between engagement with the past and nonlinear understandings of temporal movement is consistent with the work that Black Arts Movement drama— and Black Studies work more generally— has done toward an understanding and expression of Black American ways of being in the wake of enslavement.¹¹ In her essay “The ‘Atmos-Feeling’ of Resurrection,” Margo Natalie Crawford draws connections between the history of slavery and its afterlife as understood through Black Arts Movement drama.¹² She focuses on several dramatic works from this era, including *For Colored Girls*, in order to show the ways in which Black art and literature create modes of being alongside the past while simultaneously creating plausible Black futures. While Crawford doesn’t use the language of haunting in her work, we can think of the connections she draws across generations and across body and mind in the space of art and literature as an articulation of the haunted text. I bring Crawford’s work into the conversation here because there is a lot to gain from understanding these haunted moments in *For Colored Girls* within the context of the arts movement during which it was written. Crawford writes of Shange’s ability to allow “the black present to be ‘beside’ slavery and slavery to be ‘beside’ the black present” in a way that speaks to “slavery as something constantly reinvented” (Crawford, 485). This constant reinvention of a past that still lives in varying forms within the present is a crucial feature of how haunting functions in *For Colored Girls* in a way that is not necessarily inherent in Gordon’s overall understanding of haunting; the plural instances of haunting that we

¹¹ While in this section I work primarily with scholarship that engages directly with Black Arts drama and Shange’s work, I want to acknowledge Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* here, as it continually influences my thinking about the afterlives of enslavement and my phrasing when articulating the connections (or indistinctions) between past and present in this section on haunting.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

¹² Crawford, Margo Natalie. “The ‘Atmos-Feeling’ of Resurrection: Feeling Black (Not Slave) in Black Arts Movement Drama.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2019, pp. 483–501., <https://doi.org/10.3138/md.s1023r>.

see in “a Nite With Beau Willie Brown,” in conjunction with the constant absent-presence of the Black girl who has “been dead so long” at the start of the choreopoem, are rooted in generational or collective experiences of a shared death or dying, which Crawford helps us to see as a besiderness of the past and present common in Black Arts Movement literature and drama.

Feminization and Haunting

So far I have posited *For Colored Girls* as a haunted text and mapped this haunting onto the ghost of the girl who has “been dead so long,” situating haunting in the choreopoem as 1.) existing outside of a linear conception of time in its connection to the Black Arts Movement and its besiderness of an enslaved past and 2.) projecting itself primarily through the image of Black girlhood. I want to more closely examine how Gordon’s racialized and gendered dynamics of agency in haunting become significant here. The poem “abortion cycle #1,” recited by the lady in blue, depicts not only a physical death— through images like “dead mice fall from my mouth,” “bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones,” and “dyin danglin tween my legs”— but also a social and emotional death of the mother as the poem centers her pain (“this hurts / this hurts me”), her isolation (“cuz nobody knew / once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself”), and images of her physical loss (“get offa me alla this blood”) (36). Here we see a multigenerational death in which the death of the unborn child facilitates and is facilitated by the suffering and “death” of the mother. Even the poem’s title suggests the cyclical nature of a violence— however necessary— that is inflicted from mother to child and back to mother. The cycle poem, drawing from Classical and later Medieval works, can refer to a grouping of narratives by one or several different authors surrounding the same character, historical figure, or family; in applying this tradition here, we can understand “abortion cycle #1” as both a traditional expression of the perpetual

reproduction of trauma, as well as a subversion of this tradition in its positioning of death in such close proximity to reproduction. In terminating a literal and linear reproduction, the traditional cycle of linear familial narrative is broken, and instead we are left perpetually in “cycle #1.”

In her 1987 piece “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers traces the historical workings of gender and sex in Black America beginning with the separation of families in enslavement. Under chattel slavery, Spillers argues, the necessity for horizontal relatedness across language groups took precedence over the vertical means of relatedness of patriarchal inheritance. This was, in part, the result of the societal ungendering of enslaved peoples through dehumanization, physical mutilation, and the deconstruction of family structures.¹³ In thinking about Shange’s “abortion cycle #1,” we can see a similar necessity for horizontal relatedness—that is, the relatedness among the “colored girls”—when vertical relatedness is severed, in this case by the necessary but painful choice of the mother. When Spillers writes of the ways in which the ungendering of the socio-political order of the New World becomes a “scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” (Spillers, 67) for African and Indigenous peoples, Shange’s depiction of the lady in blue’s abortion certainly recalls this imagery of mutilation, as well as exile through social isolation and shame. But this poem works within a framework that is not at all ungendered—the mutilation and exile that the lady in blue experiences is a result of first the ungendering but then the *regendering* of the Black female body in order that it represents *patriarchalized* female gender. Spillers posits that the patriarchalized female gender, “from one point of view, is the *only* female gender there is” (Spillers, 73, original emphasis). In this way,

¹³ Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, Vol. 12, No. 2, The John Hopkins University Press, 1987.

“abortion cycle #1” is feminized, but only in the sense that the shame and pain it represents are the products of a femininity that is constructed to uphold white maleness.¹⁴

I don’t wish to argue here that haunting in this text is female in that it falls into a binary gendered category, or that masculinity is not implicated in and impacted by these hauntings— it certainly is; rather, I want to draw out the ways in which these hauntings move through pathways that can be identified through our existing sociological frameworks as feminized— that is, they are carried, reproduced, and potentially generative. In this way, it is not only the explicit and intentional centering of the narrative on the lives of women and girls of color, but also the underlying functions and movements of haunting in this text that feminize it. In thinking about a choreopoetic performance as a haunted “text,” we can trace, too, the ways in which Shange herself understood performance— and particularly dance— as a very literally feminized and reproductive force, “declaring not only that dance can kill structures of repression but also that in its deadliness it continues to birth new life and possibility.”¹⁵ In her exploration of the question of why she dances, she answers, “my mother” (Shange and Gumbs, XIV), positioning both the act of dancing and the motive for dancing as playing out on the terrain of the metaphorical feminized “body,” whether the physical body engaging in dance identifies with femininity.

While in the current social order, according to Spillers, patriarchalized female gender may be “the only female gender there is,” Shange uses *For Colored Girls* to create a space in

¹⁴ My functional understanding (and phrasing) of patriarchalized femininity here is in part influenced by Toni Morrison’s understanding of American Africanism in chapter 2 of *Playing in the Dark*, “Romancing the Shadow.” The idea that Africanism has functioned in the American literary tradition to construct a white American identity by contrast is useful for me in thinking about Spillers’ “patriarchalized female gender,” in that Black femininity here is similarly built from shame and othering in order to construct white male identity by contrast. I don’t intend to take Morrison’s work with American Africanism out of its context by mapping it onto constructions of female gender, but it feels relevant here, especially in thinking intersectionally about patriarchalized constructions of Black girlhood.

Morrison, Toni. “Romancing the Shadow.” *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1992.

¹⁵ Shange, Ntozake, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs. “Outlive: Dance and the Eternal Life of Ntozake Shange.” *Dance We Do: A Poet Explores Black Dance*, Beacon Press, 2020, p. XI.

which feminization occurs through horizontal relatedness among women, in addition to a sense of matrilinear relatedness, both of which resist patriarchalized female gender. In her essay “‘Colored Girls’ As Mothers: Ntozake Shange’s Independent Women,” Susanna Bösch explores single motherhood in the choreopoem, including an analysis of “abortion cycle #1.”¹⁶ Bösch notes that Shange wrote these poems in part for young girls to know the things that she didn’t as a child, rooting the intention behind the work in a maternal kind of care.

However, in the space of “abortion cycle #1,” the Lady in Blue, rejecting motherhood and rejected by horizontal modes of relatedness through her isolation, leaves us with a sense of haunting that, though certainly connected to motherhood and reproduction, falls short of generation—both in the sense of physical reproduction and in the sense of metaphorical reproduction that Shange locates in dance. While Shange certainly connects movement and dance, as well as the choreopoem itself, with generation and motherhood in the space of performance, she does not shy away from an acknowledgement of the patriarchalized, isolated reality of Black femininity as many experience it. “abortion cycle #1” functions not to dramatize a hopeless present for single Black mothers (at least not entirely); instead, it creates a foundation for imagining a more generative future through the knowledge of this reality. As Gordon writes, “We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there” (Gordon, 5). “abortion cycle #1” is not a counterexample of the healing potential of *For Colored Girls*, but rather a necessary step toward it.

¹⁶ Bösch, Susanna. “‘Colored Girls’ as Mothers: Ntozake Shange’s Independent Women.” *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1996. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43025508#metadata_info_tab_contents.

Performance and (re)Production

In order to move more effectively into this imagined “elsewhere” in the context of the choreopoem, we can follow Shange’s lead and look to performance. The terminology of “surrogation,” from Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead*,¹⁷ provides an additional layer to an understanding of haunting and its feminized modes of transmission, through the lens of performance studies. Roach argues that memory is necessarily retained through an embodied transfer that is never truly able to replicate the original. This process of imperfect surrogation is dependent upon loss and forgetting, but it is also a site of adaptation, creating a vast performance genealogy that traces inconstant memory.

It is important to note here that surrogation as Roach understands it is not inherently positive, nor is it inherently productive. Surrogation puts language to the degrees of fluidity and change that necessarily occur through the process of articulating the ghostly, but it also can function as a vehicle through which hegemonic systems retain themselves. In describing the simultaneous death of the “body natural” and renewal of the “body politic,” Roach writes, “The paradox of immortality amid physical decay symbolically asserts the divinely authorized continuity of human institutions while recognizing their inherent fragility” (Roach, 38). Surrogation can be a reproduction of trauma, carrying with it many of the same power dynamics we encounter in writing with the ghosts. Rather than ignore this reproduction of trauma, I want to acknowledge its impact while also intervening into Roach’s ideas the possibility that, in some cases, this reproduction can be in the service of something generative and healing.

¹⁷ Roach, Joseph. “Introduction: History, Memory, and Performance.” *Cities of the Dead*, Columbia University Press, 1996.

In order to draw out these generative pathways that surrogation opens up when applied in non-patriarchalized performance spaces, I want to begin with an analysis of another particularly haunting moment in *For Colored Girls*, which we can mark as an instance of generative surrogation. In the poem “toussaint,” we see spirits very literally embodied as the lady in brown describes Toussaint L’Ouverture as her “secret lover” (41), who walks beside her, sleeps beside her, and speaks to her when she is a child. The young girl in this poem is haunted by the proximity of death and her own connection with the afterlife of slavery, but this haunting is far from detrimental to her; instead, she finds empowerment in the image of L’Ouverture, in a sense leading her own “army of zombies” (41)¹⁸ as she resurrects the spirits of figures who have been lost to her not only through their physical death but also through their historical erasure:

“Toussaint / belonged in the ADULT READING ROOM” (41). The girl draws strength from history and the spirit of L’Ouverture, but, crucially, she relinquishes her imagined Toussaint L’Ouverture in favor of the living, present Toussaint Jones. In her essay “‘Speakin Arms’ and Dancing Bodies in Ntozake Shange,” Sarah Mahurin reads this transition from Toussaint L’Ouverture to Toussaint Jones as a necessary relinquishing of the spirits of the past, saying, “Though Toussaint Jones may initially seem inferior to his Haitian namesake, he does at least *have* a physical person... He may be ‘silly,’ and he may speak coarsely, but he is real”¹⁹;

however, it is important to note that Toussaint Jones is not a separate entity from Toussaint L’Ouverture for the young girl. Instead, the spirit of Toussaint L’Ouverture— which the young girl

¹⁸ The connections between zombies and the Haitian Revolution are deeply embedded in the language here. The practice of ‘zombification,’ in Haitian Vodou, involves using a drug concoction to slow a victim’s body processes to a death-like state, allowing them to be pronounced dead and buried alive. Within hours, the Vodou ‘*bokor*’ could raise the body of the victim, without the victim’s original mental capacity or memory, from the grave. The victim, in Haitian folklore, becomes a slave to the *bokor*; when Shange refers to Toussaint L’Ouverture’s “army of zombies,” the language brings with it a deep folkloric connection to the history of Haitian enslavement and revolution. Del Guercio, Gino. “From the Archives: Secrets of Haiti’s Living Dead.” *Harvard Magazine*, 2017.

¹⁹ Mahurin, Sarah. “‘Speakin Arms’ and Dancing Bodies in Ntozake Shange.” *African American Review*, vol. 46, no. 2-3, 2013, pp. 333.

perceives as the spirit of a Black man who “didn't low no white man to tell him nothin” (40)-- is not erased but transferred into his namesake, Toussaint Jones.

We can think of this partly in contrast to “her shape and his hand”; rather than the white colonial and patriarchal hand writing the shape of Black female absence, here the shape of Toussaint L'Ouverture's absence is re-embodied and made into something newly present. The presence of the history and afterlife of slavery in this text, then, is not severed or erased, but it also does not overtake the presence of real, continued Black life as embodied in Toussaint Jones. Toussaint L'Ouverture and Toussaint Jones exist alongside and within one another, positioning past and present beside each other “as we acknowledge the possibility (or even the certainty) that the two spheres are connected” (Crawford, 485). Through this image of the past transferred into the present, changed but not erased, we can see an example of surrogation as a process of generation, both in terms of being generative of something new and in terms of its connection with generational inheritance.

Having established the potential of surrogation to reproduce power dynamics and carry forward unwanted remnants of the past, then, “toussaint” helps us parse out why and in what particular ways Shange's work is able to employ a surrogation that reproduces these power dynamics *in order to disrupt them*. Like “abortion cycle #1,” this poem is recited with only one woman, the lady in brown, present on the stage. Yet here the lady in brown draws from a haunted past to ease the isolation of the present, to merge it with the present, rather than to relive it unchanged. Where the lady in blue is trapped always in “abortion cycle #1,” here the lady in brown enacts a cycle that moves, forward and back, past and present, in a harmonious dance that challenges the conception of “immortality amid physical decay” as a purely hegemonic sustainment. It is a cycle more aptly described as a revolution— both in the sense that it revolves

the past and present around and within one another, and in the sense of a radical movement and change: a fitting term for Toussaint. Toussaint is a surrogated form in this poem in that he carries the past with him, but he carries it in the service of embodying something new, something revolutionary.

Rather than writing the shape of absence, surrogation in this case attempts to transfer the shape of presence, from memory into something newly embodied. In doing so, the presence is necessarily altered, but it carries the memory forward through transformation. Surrogation, as Roach articulates for us, reproduces some of the same dynamics of power and agency that surface in Gordon's understanding of writing with the ghosts; but "toussaint" shows us an instance of surrogation as *production* rather than (or in addition to) *reproduction*. It seeks to produce a new shape without the obscuring hand of the writer. It is impossible to "find her shape in his hand" wholly, but through surrogation it is possible to create a new shape that is both whole and honors the former.

While I use the language of (re)production to reflect the particularly feminized functions of haunting and surrogation, the concept underlying this choice in language is not new to the performance studies field. Language of repetition has consistently been a major part of theorizing a definition of performance; however, the authors of *Race and Performance After Repetition* suggest that performance as *merely* a repetition of behavior, or as restored behavior, does not allow for the potentiality of change or responding to evolving needs and modes of care.²⁰ They re-situate performance as "behaved restoration" (5) rather than only restored behavior, in order to create a pathway for performance to function as a form of care and uplift that evolves along with the needs of its audience and participants. Behaved restoration, as a conception of Black

²⁰ Douglas Jones, Shane Vogel, Soyica Diggs Colbert. "Introduction." *Race and Performance After Repetition*, Duke University Press, 2020.

Feminist performance studies, is rooted in performance as living, active, evolving care in community.²¹ Bringing the terminology of behaved restoration into our understanding of the feminized haunted text, we shift the language around surrogation from reproduction into production: performance never reproduces the same event or the same affect for the audience— it produces something entirely new in each iteration, while the haunting of each former iteration is carried recessively through surrogation.

In the intersection of this language of carrying and embodying, we return to the reproductive terminology that marks patriarchalized female gender for Spillers. Surrogation, in a physical, reproductive sense, is not an isolated process— it is dependent on an inherently horizontal relationship of generativity, in addition to a vertical relationship among the generations created. Though historically rooted in forced labor and a maintenance of power structures, to carry a child on another’s behalf *by choice* is also to be tied to a sort of non-linear lineage, resisting isolation through the act of involving another in a triaged parentage during the physical process of birthing. In reinstating the literal, reproductive significance of surrogate parenting into Roach’s theoretical understanding of surrogation, we find a framework for breaking from the vertical patriarchal relatedness that Spillers marks for us, instead locating a horizontal relatedness in surrogate reproduction. To apply this framework to the work of *For Colored Girls*, we can understand choreopoetic performance as a sort of shared carrying, rather than a representation of the historically gendered and racialized forced labor in reproduction that Spillers describes.

The performance space that Shange creates in “For Colored Girls” is able to de-patriarchalize production precisely by bringing it outside of the traditions of female gender and reproduction that Spillers articulates. This space is created first by the relatedness of the

²¹ Ibid.

seven women on stage to each other; then by the horizontalizing of their histories with their lived experiences; and finally by the projection of this relatedness onto an audience of women of color, including the audience's own relatednesses and histories. The embodied transfer of memory that we find in the masculine body in "toussaint" is a beautiful example of the ways in which surrogation, within this de-patriarchalized space, becomes (re)productive of revolution regardless of the gendered presentations of the body through which it occurs; constructions of gender no longer matter when the space of surrogation itself has been de-patriarchalized. Through the collective and communally responsive performance space that Shange creates in *For Colored Girls*, she enacts a form of behaved restoration that de-patriarchalizes and de-essentializes the (re)productive pathways of haunting that we can understand as feminized. With an understanding of surrogation through terms of (re)production in a sense that is both feminized and resistant to patriarchalized female gender, Shange situates haunting as necessarily tied to healing, or at least the potential for healing, in its work of production.

Healing

In the language of haunting as a way of knowing, of performance as restorative, productive surrogation, and of both of these following pathways that we can identify through feminized terms, we can begin to understand healing as a twin to, and an inevitability within, haunting. The final poem in the collection, "A Layin on of Hands" (84), comes directly after "A Nite With Beau Willie Brown." From a space of intense haunting, a space in which the death of Crystal's children Naomi and Kwame hangs over the stage and the audience with a heaviness that feels unbreachable, we enter into a space of intense healing. Equipped with an understanding

of both haunting and performance as (re)productive, we know that haunting is not the pain that surrounds Crystal and Beau Willie's story; rather, haunting is the knowledge that comes after, the urge toward care in the aftermath that ushers us into a space where healing is possible. Following the final line of "A Nite With Beau Willie Brown," the Lady in Red begins to narrate "A Layin on of Hands," still playing the role of Crystal for the audience despite the transition into a new poem in the space of the written text. However, each of the other women responds to the Lady in Red, coming to life one by one as witnesses to Crystal's pain. The stage directions do not suggest that the women reenter the stage to join the Lady in Red at this point; rather, we can assume that they have been there all along bearing witness to Crystal's story, perhaps "frozen in postures of distress" as they were in the very beginning. The lines of this poem are split among all seven women's voices, creating a sense that the experience is shared, that the burden does not belong to just one. The proximity of the women to death and trauma is still very present, but it is undercut by the proximity of the women to each other, by the triaging of feeling. In this way the quantity of bodies on the stage— and the quantity of voices— is as crucial to the embodiment of the content as their movement and words.

As the Lady in Red begins the poem with the words, "i waz missin somethin" (84), each of the ladies comes to life around her to take up the words, "somethin so important" (Lady in Purple), "somethin promised" (Lady in Brown), "a layin on of hands" (Lady in Blue). Shange does not offer stage directions or choreography in the text of this section, until the very end, but even the written and spoken words themselves imply a necessity for movement and physical touch ("a layin on of hands") to find a resolution to the poem. In the 2022 Broadway production of the choreopoem, each of the women surrounds the Lady in Red, laying their hands on her body as they recite the poem together. In the text itself, the Lady in Red does not speak again

until the end of the poem, but although we can not see her standing in the center as we can in the performed version, the haunting of her experience in “A Nite With Beau Willie Brown” gives us a remaining sense that the ritual is, in part, for her. In fact, the haunting of each of the ladies’ narratives allows us to understand this final ritual in connection with them. It is here that we find a resolution to the Lady in Brown’s initial plea for “someone / anyone” to “sing a black girl’s song,” as well as an antidote to the Lady in Blue’s attempt to sing this song in isolation in “abortion cycle #1.” In “abortion cycle #1” we found that haunting is not adequate to generate healing when it is enacted alone or under patriarchalized constructions of female shame; in “Toussaint,” we found a more generative iteration of haunting through surrogation, yet it still acts in isolation. Here, we find that the same feminized haunting, when enacted in community with other women, in a performance space designed to exist outside of patriarchalized conceptions of femininity, brings us to a space of healing.

To theorize healing as a twin to haunting here, and to more effectively understand the work that “A Layin On of Hands” does, we can look toward conceptions of African spirituality as engaged with both haunting and healing in ways that are inherently entwined. In “Pedagogies of the Sacred,” for instance, M. Jacqui Alexander positions spiritual work as a mode of healing that encompasses (as, for Alexander, all real healing must) the internal and external self in reconciliation with the spiritual world.²² Alexander writes, “In the realm of the Sacred... the invisible constitutes its presence by a provocation of sorts, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there” (Alexander, 307). The Sacred, for Alexander, functions similarly to the ghostly for Gordon, in that the Sacred is also a way of knowing, dependent upon an attention to the invisible presence. But in thinking about the ghostly

²² Alexander, M. Jacqui. “Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible” *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005.

as an extension of the Sacred, and the Sacred as a mode of healing, we can also understand the ghostly as connected with healing in a way that extends from traditional healing ritual to the Black Feminist performance theory that we've applied more directly to Shange's work.

Jean Young really wonderfully illustrates some of the ways in which these performed healing practices rooted in spiritual labor apply to Shange's work in her essay "Ritual Poetics and Rites of Passage in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*."²³ Young, like Alexander, acknowledges the crucial cooperation of mind, body, and spirit in healing work, and she particularly applies this to the ritualized speech and movement that we see in the seven women's call and response and "laying on of hands." Young locates an element of what she calls "rebirth" in ritual healing practices of the body and spirit. The term "rebirth" beautifully encompasses the work of "A Layin On of Hands," as it brings the language of reproduction outside of the patriarchalized space that it inhabits in "abortion cycle #1" and allows each of the women in the ritual to be *reborn*— not a repetition of the pain they have expressed, but a newly restorative life *from* that pain and from proximity to each other. In its textual form, "A Layin On of Hands" enacts this rebirth solely through the words that each of the women speaks. The lines of the poem are split among each of the seven, such that they share not only the feeling but the words themselves. In returning to the lady in brown's initial plea, "somebody/ anybody / sing a black girl's song" (18), the act of sharing speech here is more than a breaking of silence but is a shared giving of life; even on the page, from the beginning to the end of the choreopoem, Shange creates a relationship between language and the physical life of the body, such that in this space, the ritual rebirth that Young locates through the entwinement of body, mind, and soul is perceivable even in text. In establishing language, poetry, and song, as

²³ Young, Jean. "Ritual Poetics and Rites of Passage in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*." *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*. Temple University Press, 2002.

carriers of life, the shared construction of “A Layin On of Hands” among the seven women is an enactment of the shared carrying that we can locate in surrogative performance.

However, as Alexander and Young’s works demonstrate, the facilitation of haunting into healing is dependent upon a partnership of the voice and the body, of ritual and movement, and of the female body in collective with others. Thus while the text of *For Colored Girls* creates a foundation for moving with its ghosts, it is only performance— and particularly performance that we can mark as surrogative, productive, and adaptive, connecting intentionally the body to the mind and spirit— that facilitates the movement of the text between haunting and healing. The work of the performed version of “A Layin On of Hands,” then, is to take the shared carrying of language— and with it, of body and spirit— and *produce* the ghosts the language carries in order to heal alongside them and each other. In the 2022 Broadway production, the actors begin the final poem by slowly forming a protective circle around the lady in red, each delivering their lines as they kneel around her placing hands on her head, chest, and stomach as she stands tall and central. Importantly, the ritual entwinement of the body and spirit with language is not limited to spoken language; the 2022 production’s lady in purple, for example, delivered her lines alternately in spoken language and sign language. In returning to Crawford’s language of the besideness of the past and present, we can understand haunting and healing as existing beside one another in the choreopoem, just as language (in its varied forms) and body exist beside one another. Haunting does not need to be resolved by or in favor of healing; rather, it is only through the perception of haunting that healing becomes and continues to be underway.

Conclusion: Moving With the Ghosts

By looking at the relationship between speech and movement that is so essential to the choreopoem form, a multimodal analysis of Shange's work enables an understanding of performance as a facilitator between haunting and healing, in ways that are rooted in spiritual knowledge and that affirm Black girlhood as existing outside of patriarchalized constructions. In moving through the poems of Shange's collection with an understanding of their haunting as an urge toward knowing, we can find a reading of the choreopoem that not only resists stagnancy in suffering, but actively engages in a generative, productive process of healing with each iteration of performance.

To return briefly to Gordon's urging toward "writ[ing] with the ghosts," I would like to posit that the embodied form of the choreopoem, in its surrogated carrying of memory, is instead a mode of *moving* with the ghosts— that is, engaging with the knowledge of haunting from a space of performance as behaved restoration, removing the hand that writes the absence and instead (re)birthing the shape of a new presence.

In moving through *For Colored Girls* with an understanding of what it brings to us from cooperating lenses of literary studies and Black Feminist performance studies, we have located in the choreopoem an enactment of what Avery Gordon understands as haunting as an urge to visibility and knowledge— as well as an embodied performance, rooted in ritual spiritual practices of the collective mind and body, of the rebirth that takes place when we allow this haunting to be generative and (re)productive.

While *For Colored Girls* is one example of moving with the ghosts, this work also introduces a wider scope of where we can locate the potential for healing. If we can understand

spaces of performance as spaces of healing and vice versa, there are countless modes through which we can move with the ghosts in ways that are productive and restorative. One example of this, discussed in detail in *Race and Performance After Repetition*, is the work of Simone Leigh through *Free People's Medical Clinic*, which is both a community health center and a curated archive of information tracing the history of public health in Black America over the last two centuries (Colbert, Jones, & Vogel, 2). Leigh's work at the intersection of performance and healing reaffirms not only that there is space for care in performance, but that care is inherent to the work that performance does. Where there is collective engagement with movement, language, and a willingness to allow haunting to inform our needs to attend to, there will always be production, and Shange creates a space where, in their pain, there is always rebirth for her "colored girls."

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